

SHRIPAD KRISHNA KOLHATKAR:

A reassessment

Sunil Subhedar

Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar had a greatness which has lost its thrust with the passage of time. This became apparent in the Kolhatkar Centenary year (August 1971-August 72) when the elder generation referred to him with a boundless sense of gratitude while the younger generation remained sceptic, obviously distrustful of the professions of the elders. That Kolhatkar, whose plays had been elbowed out of the stage half-a-century ago, should be able to influence three consecutive generations and some of the luminaries in this period should regard him as their *guru* is somewhat mystifying. The saga of his success as a force in shaping the theatre of the future while himself being relegated to the past is a queer instance in dramatic history meriting careful consideration.

Viewed in an historical perspective the genius of Kolhatkar was pre-eminently that of a synthetist. On the one hand there was the outworn classical tradition of Sanskrit plays and on the other was the spectacular Hindustani stage run by the Parsis. A third, and much more potent force was the study of western classics at the University. The task of blending these three motley and apparently contrary entities into a harmonious pattern needed a special talent which no other contemporary possessed in the measure of Kolhatkar.

Before the advent of Kolhatkar even a social play, along with the mythological, began with a *Nati-Sutradhar* dialogue. Evergreen *Churnika*, crabbed old *Kanchuki* and gluttonous *Vidushaka* invariably presented themselves as archetypal characters. Frailty of the king and jealousy between his wives, the pining and wailing of the King for his new beloved also used to be ready in the stock. Kolhatkar rejected the Sanskrit tradition of carnal attachment (*Rati-bhava*) and preferred to depict a romantic longing (*Preeti-bhava*). He threw all these prototypes aboard and became the first dramatist in Marathi to construct an

original plot. If this pioneer thought that a complicated construction would win greater admiration than a presentation of a simple story, it should be quite understandable. It is pointless to register a complaint against him that his plots are difficult to remember. He belonged to the genre of Ben Jonson and who remembers the story of *Every Man In His Humour*?

Judged by modern standards the Parsi drapery and costume may appear to be gaudy rather than impressive, but when contrasted with the contemporary Marathi stage it had undeniable richness. The kind of drapery and costume used by Kavasji Khatau's New Alfred Theatrical Company and Old Parsi Theatrical Company for such plays as *Gulebakavali*, *Haman*, *Chatrabkavali*, *Khudadad* and *Rustam-o-Sohrab* was certainly unsuitable for a social play. This compelled Kolhatkar to invent a new genre of social comedy which is not bound by time or place, yet reflects the contemporary society. Kolhatkar was about to approach a Parsi company which used to stage Marathi plays (unfortunately its name has not been unearthed) but in the meanwhile Kirloskar Natak Mandali accepted the script of *Viratanaya* in 1896. By 1911 Khadilkar improved and perfected this genre of social-cum-romantic comedy in his *Manapaman* which is still one of the most successful plays. It is, however, worth recording that the practice of stitching a set of costume for every character in a play dates back to Kolhatkar's *Premshodhan* staged in 1910.

Stress on Music

Another attraction which Parsi theatre held for Kolhatkar was music. Earlier dramatists in Marathi used to lean heavily on such easy rhythm as in *Saki*, *Dindi* or *Chkkad*. Kirloskar (1843-1885) made the first effort at presenting a kind of semi-opera by introducing tunes from classical Indian music. While selecting a *raga* he was careful not to violate the traditional convention about the timing appropriate for it. Kolhatkar was the first dramatist to throw his net wide and introduce, along with *Khayal* and *Thumri*, even *Ghazal* and *Qawwali*. Duets in the manner of Parsi theatre were already popular on the Marathi stage. Kolhatkar used duets in a much more coherent and meaningful way. One of the songs in *Muknayak* (1901) was composed on the tune of *Rajah Hun Main Kaunka* from *Indrasabha* (1853) by Syed Agahasan 'Amanat' (1816-1858). Nearly half of his tunes are from Parsi theatre bringing exotic charm. Kolhatkar, himself a singer of no mean merit, frequented the Parsi theatre for memorising these tunes. If interested in a particular tune, Kolhatkar would make himself comfortable in the narrow dark lane at the back of Rippon Theatre and eavesdrop at the propitious hour! When *Premshodhan* was staged in 1910, *tabla*, harmonium and other musical instruments were rescued from the wing, in imitation of the Parsi theatre, and given pride of place in the fore-front. This action was symbolic. Henceforth music was to rule supreme: all other aspects, including acting, were now secondary.

It is debatable whether this was a change for the good. Many critics subscribe to the view expressed in *Maratha*, a nineteenth century weekly

published from Poona: "It was an evil day for the Marathi stage when the public acquired a vicious taste for what is called *sangeet* drama." This condemnation preceded the advent of Kolhatkar and it is worth verifying whether Kolhatkar necessitated a moderation in the statement. In Kolhatkar, songs appear as a purple link in the development of the plot. Some of his songs are ridden with Sanskrit compounds and are, therefore, difficult to follow. But this was inevitable because he was allergic to stock-phrases evoking stock-responses. When a poet tries to hammer a new metaphor there is every risk of his framing a conceit, such as the Metaphysical poets in England had. Moreover, unlike a literary person; Kolhatkar was a star-gazer; and this habituation forced him to write astronomical conceits making his songs much more difficult. Fortunately, Kolhatkar was ever conscious that like dialogue a song is also to be acted. When the song was difficult to follow, acting might help.

But there is a hitch. In a craze for new tunes the essential co-relationship between the meaning of the song and its tune was overlooked. Songs in Marathi were tailored in faithful adherence to the tune of their Urdu counterpart; the two pieces did not necessarily have a shade of resemblance in their meaning. For instance, the tune of *Meri Jaan Dulhan Tayyar* was allowed for antithetical emotion in *Tujwin Game Vritha Sansar*. It is elementary aesthetics that a musical tune should be in harmony with the meaning of the song; but, somehow, this thought was wilfully neglected. In Kolhatkar we come across several songs replete with compound words in Sanskrit style and yet sung in quick and fast rhythm. But it would be unjust to pull up Kolhatkar for this error in application of a tune since musicians like Govindrao Tembe also ignored the vital association. A culmination of this practice is perceptible in *Mee Nayabala Jogan Banale* being sung to the tune of *Nai Joban Wali Ka Mazza!* If *Jogan* and *Joban* are phoenetically similar, that served the purpose; why scratch the head over semantics. In our own times *Bhajans* are composed to the tunes of popular film music. The practice on the Marathi stage was no less vulgar. This is probably one of the reasons why Marathi stage could not develop an opera which thrives on the unity of song and music.

There are, however, some redeeming features of this endeavour. As tunes from Urdu, Gujarati and Karnatak sources were eagerly adopted, it broadened the outlook and encouraged a sense of gratitude for neighbours. *Ugich Ka Kanta*, one of the famous songs by Kolhatkar, has borrowed its tune from a hymn in Karnatak: *Idu Idu Idu Karuna Narayana*. Kolhatkar's plays might have been pushed from theatre to library, but this song continues to move audiences at musical concerts. Abdul Karim Khan, Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale, Sawai Gandharva, Hirabai Barodekar and Bhimsen Joshi have often picked it up as their favourite song. A score of such fine songs from *sangeet natak* have found their rightful place in musical concerts. This, in itself, is not a meagre gain.

The passion for new tunes made some of the dramatists so restless that they developed intimacy with women in *Tamasha* or *Nautanki*.

Kolhatkar's attempt at cutting across the social barriers gave rise to a romantic affinity with Hirabai Pednekar, the first woman to write a play for the Marathi stage. Their association lasted for about six years and unfortunately terminated in a tragic manner. Her contemporaries referred to her as George Sand and Kolhatkar has acknowledged in his autobiography that she breathed life into his heroines. While Hirabai was active at Bombay she cooperated with almost all the dramatists of her time by offering tunes from various sources, particularly from Goa.

The Bengali stage influenced Marathi theatre in an indirect but quite unexpected manner. Kolhatkar made his acquaintance with Bengali stage through books. That slender evidence compelled him to compliment the Bengali people for their "sensibility much superior to that of the Maharashtrians." He also made an interesting comment that Bengali names in Amritlal Bose's *Tarubala* evoke olfactory as well as savoury responses. A good many popular names in Maharashtra to-day are from Bengal, and credit for introducing them goes to Kolhatkar. The Bengali names of various characters in his plays must have had a unique appeal for his audience.

Social Themes

Kolhatkar was the first dramatist with a social purpose in mind. Theoretically he declared that he belonged, citing evidence of Sanskrit writes on Poetics, to the school of art for art's sake but his plays give an unmistakable impression that he was almost a crusader in revamping a degenerated society. He wrote *Mukhnayak* (1901) on the evils of liquor which inspired *Vidyaharan* (1913) by Khadilkar and *Ekach Pyala* (1919) by Gadkari. His other plays deal with various marital problems: marriage of a widow, uneven marriage, intercast marriage, evils of polygamy and the dignity of women as equal partners. Any dramatist trying to shake the complacency of his audience is greeted with severe criticism and Kolhatkar was no exception. With full consciousness that a marriage of a widow was sure to repel the patrons, he did have the courage and audacity to follow his conviction in the year 1906. It is worth recording that his own disciple, Gadkari, preferred the path of compromise, although seven years had elapsed, and served the widow heroine with a glass of poison. Audiences could well stand the suicide of a widow, but not her remarriage.

Kolhatkar was a celebrated conversationalist of his time, almost a second Oscar Wilde, and therefore it was natural for him to prize brilliant flashes of wit more than the swaying of emotions. His generosity was so impartial that every character—be it a maid servant or a mere child—was allowed to indulge in witticism. He gives an impression that every character in his plays has one single desire: to outwit the other in a confrontation. This may be unnatural, but it regaled the audience for many years. To-day the memory of his plays does not bring to mind even a handful of powerful characters. The cutting repartee has become a treasure of Marathi literature. It is amusing to note that he recommended Wycherley, Congreve, Sheridan, Wilde and

Molière as worthy of imitation. An interesting anecdote is told that Lokmanya Tilak, after listening to verbal exchanges in *Guptamanjush* (1901), exclaimed, "What a waste of brilliance!"

It might be that a developing theatre in any language has to pass through the stage of intellectual stimulation, which obviously cannot win a lasting patronage. All the same Kolhatkar ruled supreme for fifteen years. His first play was acted in 1896 and the setting of his prime was on the way by 1911. Thereafter Kolhatkar lived metaphorically in superior imitations of his manner by more powerful dramatists like Warerkar (1883-1965), Khadilkar (1872-1948) and Gadkari (1885-1919). These dramatists picked up the instruments welded by Kolhatkar (1871-1934) and used them much more skilfully. This was, in a small measure, like Shakespeare using the material of his predecessors with impunity and in return driving them off the stage.

However, a mark of his inter-lingual popularity is that Kolhatkar is probably the only dramatist whose important works have been translated into Telugu in the first two decades of this century. It is for our Andhra friends to enlighten us about his success in the Telugu theatre.

Considered in this historical perspective Kolhatkar's contribution occupies a unique place in the development of Marathi theatre. His energies were spent in achieving a breakthrough in several fields. He is also a pioneer of humourous prose and his merit as an astronomer was recognised by no less a scholar than Lokmanya Tilak. Maharashtra has not seen a genius with more versatile interests. If the younger generation slights his forgotten plays, our critics are to be blamed. Beaumont and Fletcher needed Charles Lamb for resurrection.